

“You can’t change the world
if you’re an asshole.”

On the importance of affective politics

Two articles selected by Book-Café the Barricade.

One can throw away a chair and destroy a pane of glass; but those are idle talkers and credulous idolaters of words who regard the state as such a thing or as a fetish that one can smash in order to destroy it. The state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another. One day it will be realised that Socialism is not the invention of anything new, but the discovery of something actually present, of something that has grown. We are the state, and we shall continue to be the state until we have created the institutions that form a real community and society.

- Gustav Landauer

Contents

Our Relationships Keep Us Alive.....	7
The Stifling Air of Rigid Radicalism	19

Our Relationships Keep Us Alive

By EJERIS DIXON

This piece has been a long time coming. As a young person, I spent years interviewing women involved in the Black Power movement, reading their letters, poetry and essays. I was researching their experiences and the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder on their lives. Later on, I realized that I was searching for a way to be involved with movement work in which my spirit, personality and hope could remain intact. I've learned that part of that work is mine alone. But part of it is a shared endeavor: It is about how we treat each other.

I was working with groups where their relationships were so fraught that their political work had come to a standstill.

My vision for 2018 is that we dedicate ourselves to addressing harm and repairing relationships within social justice movements. I spent most of 2017 traveling around the US, supporting groups organizing against intense political threats. Some were directly confronting white supremacists, others addressing violence against LGBTQ communities, supporting communities under threat of deportation, or working within Black communities facing state violence. Much of my work with these organizations was highly confidential crisis management.

During these repressive times, people assume that most of the crises in activism and organizing are external. Instead, I was working with groups where their relationships were so fraught that their political work had come to a standstill -- organizations where people had stopped talking to each other, where people were being abusive and bullying each other, where issues of violence and theft had arisen. In some cases, folks in the same collective were criticizing each other or their organizations on social media, but refusing to name these critiques in person.

Without shifting our focus to repairing our relationships, our movements will rot from the inside out.

In organization after organization, I saw the same pattern. Folks mobilize through an intense period. They do what we've all been taught and save their critique for later discussion. And when there's a break from the external crisis, they tear each other apart. As an organizer, I was taught to recruit people into the movement and to support them to stay involved. But I wasn't taught how to repair relationships or to prevent harm. Many of us aren't taught these skills.

Our campaigns, our base-building and our political analysis cannot and will not save us from this threat. Even worse, our external opponents not only are capitalizing on our fractures, but feeding them. Sometimes, we are our own strongest opposition. Without shifting our focus to repairing our relationships, our movements will rot from the inside out.

How to Ruin Movement Relationships

There are some surefire ways to ruin our movement relationships. Distrust is usually the source of conflict, and distrust can start from how we enter our meetings, actions and other movement spaces. A few causes of distrust that I've observed are misalignment, call-out culture, secret maneuvering and relationship neglect.

Misalignment: When Values and Actions Don't Match

In short, hypocrisy repels people. In the last year alone, so many people have lost faith and left organizations that claim to center oppressed communities and truly don't. When people feel that an organization or movement promised them liberation and instead they experienced oppression, they feel betrayed. For many people, it's a gut-wrenching form of heartbreak that leads them to exit our movements. For others, they stay, but retain a level of anger and bitterness that can be toxic.

Another issue is when an organization claims to have a collective or horizontal process, but doesn't really: Folks with more time and more education; who come from higher-class backgrounds; and who are white, masculine, cisgender, citizens, or have other forms of privilege are truly the people making decisions. When the process for aligning our values with our actions is unclear or keeps changing, it can ruin our relationships to each other and to the work.

Living our values while existing in a society that exemplifies the opposite means that we will struggle and sometimes fail in this area. For example, many small community organizations haven't always had the budget for the staffing that their work required. To navigate this gap, these groups paid people low salaries and they often hired people with class and educational privilege. These groups didn't need to provide solid benefits or consistent hours because people didn't need childcare, full-time work or access to quality health care. Yet, if an organization claims to represent or center low-income people, these practices must change. Just because an organization started this way, doesn't mean it's OK to continue.

Continued misalignment of values and actions creates distrust that leads to irreparable conflicts. To address this, I believe that we need to explicitly name the struggles that our groups are having early on, and work diligently toward addressing them.

Critique for the sake of destruction only serves our opponents.
Disingenuous Call-Outs

Misalignment often leads to call-outs. By "call-outs," I'm speaking to a form of political critique designed to publicly name something that an organization, movement or person has done that is oppressive and sometimes harmful. Call-outs are often a form of critique used by people with less power than the organizations or people that they are critiquing, with the hope that the call-out will lead to the issue being addressed. Some call-outs are necessary, and truth-telling is not designed to be pretty. But some call-outs

are disingenuous and even manipulative. I've worked on several processes to support groups to transform issues raised through call-outs. In some cases, the folks making the call outs are not interested in change. Sometimes this is because people are too traumatized to stay engaged. And sometimes people are actually interested in the demise of the organization or group.

The spirit of the call-out matters. Critique for the sake of destruction only serves our opponents. I've seen people use call-outs as a way to be abusive and harmful, or in an attempt to become leaders - not to create positive change, but merely to exploit others. The worst part is when these manipulative call-outs obscure the real issues folks are raising and are interested and investing in addressing. Disingenuous call-outs mean that we see this form of critique as inherently unprincipled and become resistant to change.

Additionally, call-out culture has made it incredibly costly to make mistakes, whether intentional or unintentional. I think about how many times I've decided not to speak for fear of call-outs because I didn't want to be publicly shamed on social media -- "dragged" -- so I stick to safe topics in which I'm politically knowledgeable. We've created a culture of silence where very few people speak their mind. People who do not fear being dragged can be awesome, even inspiring. A movement where the only people speaking have no fear of being dragged is a nightmare.

If we envision a world where communities work together to address violence and to ensure that our basic needs are met, then our movements can't operate like secret societies.

Secret Maneuvers

On the opposite spectrum from call-outs are avoidant secret maneuvers. As opposed to directly delivering a critique or feedback to someone, we maneuver around them. We spread rumors about people we dislike. We block people from accessing meetings, fellowships and gatherings. We even create lists of problematic people to exclude them. We play chess with each other without naming the actual issue or conflict. I'm not speaking about the

ways people may maneuver around others due to safety, or how people choose to navigate someone after a series of failed attempts to address conflict or harm. However, sometimes we're being conflict-averse and divisive, fostering a culture of secrecy and distrust. There are times when people who have lost trust in others or experienced harm want to continue political work, but have trouble engaging with newcomers and strangers. This can work for certain projects, but not for mass-based organizing and activism.

We can't create the scale or the visionary context that we need under these conditions. We all need to figure out a new strategy -- myself included. If we envision a world where communities work together to address violence and to ensure that our basic needs are met, then our movements can't operate like secret societies.

We must ensure that we value our folks beyond what they produce for our movements.

Neglect

Conflict also stems from people neglecting each other. Sometimes we are so busy that we forget to acknowledge the sacrifice that people are making for our movements. We don't say "thank you." We don't lift up other people's leadership. Years of neglect can heighten conflict. For some organizational processes that I have worked on, issues arise from a degree of interpersonal bitterness only built from people feeling unacknowledged for years.

Many folks join movements to feel like they belong somewhere. While we can't heal that void, we can at least be present with and acknowledge that need. And we must ensure that we value our folks beyond what they produce for our movements. To build the societies that we need, we need to connect with each other beyond whether or not someone is going to be at the next action and get to know each other's lives to build the kinds of revolutionary interdependence that we're all seeking.

I've also witnessed the particular form of neglect that happens when people pursue celebrity. Social media has created a space

where people can build their platforms and brands, separate from building movements. I've seen movement leaders get so focused on their next keynote, think piece or television appearance that they neglect their relationships and get competitive with their comrades. The market for progressive celebrity is real. But neglecting or disrespecting others in order to become a "woke" celebrity isn't getting us closer to freedom.

How to Repair Relationships and Rebuild Trust

To focus on repairing our relationships, we have to shift our practices and deepen our values. Our practices shape our culture.

I was working with an organization on their leadership development strategies. As I was reviewing their trainings, I realized that all of the trainings were designed to increase the participant's critical analysis. To strengthen our movements, we need people who understand capitalism, neoliberalism, heteropatriarchy, cissexism, criminalization, colonialism and so many other systems and forms of oppression. But building analysis without also giving people the skills to create consensus, build community, facilitate meetings, address harm and adhere to agreements often creates a space where all conversation is critique.

We can win campaigns without healing trauma, but we will lose each other in the process.

To address the toxicity that's flowing throughout our movement culture, we will have to teach each other how to be trustworthy and build trustworthiness. Recently, a good friend and I brainstormed the values that we thought were most needed (and sometimes missing) in our movement work. Over coffee, we dreamt up a list of core values that, if applied, could radically shift harm, distrust and negativity that people can experience in movement spaces. We came up with honesty, integrity, loyalty, accountability and a commitment to personal transformation.

Honesty

We must stop lying to ourselves and others. We've created a context where people are so fearful of making mistakes or saying the wrong things that people are being silent, lying or exaggerating. Trust thrives on honesty. And lies can cause deep wounds in relationships.

Loyalty

Somehow, loyalty has become a bad word. When I use "loyalty," I'm thinking about the commitments we make to each other. People need to know that they are wanted and will be welcomed, even when they make mistakes and cause harm. So many of us are looking for people who will be there with us on our worst days. Our relationships have become terrifyingly conditional: We agree to stay in connection with people only when their politics and practices are perfect. We often talk about "commitment" only in terms of romantic relationships and commitment to the visions and issues that we work on. To realize our visions, we have to practice deep, long-term commitments to each other.

Integrity

We need to stop pretending that it's ok to call our work "social justice" while treating each other terribly. The integrity of our movements arises from the extent to which we commit to living our values. And as we build the world we want to live in, we're going to navigate a lot of contradictions. My rules of thumb are: Are we getting closer to our vision? Are we taking the time, finding the resources, and having the hard conversations to be in integrity? For example, if I'm in a space that's working to center people of color in leadership, my questions are: To what extent are people of color currently leading? How are we dismantling structural oppression and increasing opportunities for the future? Finally, are we remaining vigilantly focused on this goal?

Accountability

I see accountability as the labor of repair. To truly inhabit this value, we need the ability and willingness to be held accountable, as well as the skillset to hold ourselves accountable. Accountability starts with self-reflection; we must have the willingness to critique ourselves

and to see our impact on others. How many of us are actively engaged in the work of repair? How many of us are working to gain training or experience in conflict resolution, trust-building, healing justice or transformative justice? I'm tired of having exhausted meetings with people who do conflict resolution, community accountability and transformative justice. Everyone I know who is skilled at holding space for personal and community transformation is stretched really thin. We need to stop seeing accountability and repair as separate skills that are outside of community organizing. Everyone within our movements needs to learn that building trust, repairing relationships and addressing harm are a core part of movement-building.

Commitment to Personal Transformation

I've engaged in all of these harmful behaviors myself, and I am continuing to work to transform. I write this piece not from a place of empty critique, but a deep desire for transformation. Many of the behaviors I name stem from trauma, whether a person has experienced trauma within or outside our social-justice movements. As movements working to center people who have experienced oppression, we're often working with long-term, deep-rooted experiences of trauma collectively. To truly repair relationships, each of us needs to be committed to doing our own healing work, and to not have our movement relationships be our sole source of support. Healing from trauma is a lifetime journey. Our commitment to personal transformation is the foundation for our ability to show up in alignment with our movement values. We can win campaigns without healing trauma, but we will lose each other in the process.

I think we should all create a list of movement values for ourselves and assess how we embody them. Over time, we can push ourselves to move towards them. What are your movement values?

Toward Repair and Trust-Building

If our goal is to be bitter revolutionaries, communicating from our bunkers, then we're succeeding. But have you talked to a bitter revolutionary? I've laughed and learned from the brilliance of their perspectives, but left the conversation depressed, hungry and anxious. At the pace that we're going, we will have so many fractures that even if we are able to make the changes we seek, we'll be doing it all with such bitterness and distrust.

My vision for 2018 is simple: I desire compassion over destruction and connection over celebrity. In these times, it's our relationships that will keep us together and will keep us alive. I feel firmly that this year, it's not about the size of our mobilizations, or how strategic our campaigns are, but the strength of our relationships.

It's about being able to create a new relational mode. What happens is that no one knows exactly how to do it - and it requires a collective process, it's not like someone is going to come over and tell us how. One thing we have called this is 'affective politics', politics of affections... When this new form of politics emerges it establishes a new territory, or spatiality... and how is this sustained? It cannot be supported through ideology. In the beginning, the assembly consisted of people from all walks of life, ranging from the housewife who declared 'I am not political', to the typical party hack. But there was a certain sensibility, something affective, and that generated a certain kind of interpersonal relationship. It generated a way of being and a certain sense of 'we'... Speaking of affective politics, we are talking about a lot of different things for which previously there were no word. It's a new language, and this new language constitutes a new space.

- Conversation in Colgiales, Buenos Aires, 2003

The Stifling Air of Rigid Radicalism

Can radical politics harbor a deadening conservatism?

By CARLA BERGMAN and NICK MONTGOMERY

This essay is based on an excerpt of Joyful Militancy by carla bergman and Nick Montgomery (foreword by Hari Alluri), recently published by AK Press in collaboration with the Institute for Anarchist Studies.

ABOUT a century ago, the famous anarchist Emma Goldman was at a party, dancing her heart out, when a young man took her aside. “With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade,” the man told her that “it did not behoove an agitator to dance.” It made the revolutionary movement look bad, he said. Goldman was pissed, and basically told the guy to fuck off. This encounter is thought to be the source of the now famous defense of joy and play often attributed to Goldman: “If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution.” This wasn’t just about dancing. Goldman insisted that conformity and policing persisted within radical movements themselves, and radicals were expected to put “the Cause” before their own desires.

A century later, while the rules may have changed, something still circulates in many political spaces, movements, and milieus, sapping their power from within. It is the vigilant apprehension of errors and complicities in oneself and others; the sad comfort of sorting unfolding events into dead categories; the pleasure of feeling more radical than others and the fear of not being radical enough; the anxious posturing on social media with the highs of being liked and the lows of being ignored; the suspicion and resentment felt in the presence of something new; the way curiosity feels naive and condescension feels right. We can sense its emergence at certain times, when we feel the need to perform in certain ways, hate the right things, and make the right gestures. We’ve found ourselves on both sides of its puritanical tendencies, as the pure and the corrupt. Above all, it is hostile to difference, curiosity, openness, and experimentation.

This phenomenon cannot be exhaustively described, because it is always mutating and recirculating. It cannot be reduced to certain people or behaviors. It is not that there are a bunch of assholes out there stifling movements and imploding worlds. In fact, this vigilant search for flawed people or behaviors—and the exposure of them everywhere—can be part of the toxic process. No one is immune to it. It is widely felt, but difficult to talk about, so there's not much point in shouting about it. It is more like a gas: continually circulating, working on us behind our backs, and guiding us towards rigidities, closures, and hostility. The air makes us cough certainties: Some feel provoked, and attack or shrink away; others push cough medicine; but none of this stops the spread. For us at least, there is no cure, no gas mask, no unitary solution.

We have come to call this force rigid radicalism. It is both a fixed way of being and a way of fixing. It fixes in the sense of attempting to repair, seeing emergent movements as inherently flawed. To fix is to see everything as broken, and treat struggles and projects as deficient. It also fixes in the sense of making permanent, converting fluid practices into stagnant ways of being. When rigidity takes over, creative transformation dies out.

TODAY, one way that rigid radicalism materializes is through the notion of “good politics.” In many circles, it has become common to say of an individual or group, “They have good politics.” What does it mean to have good politics? What happens when politics becomes something a person has, rather than something people do together, as a shared practice? What happens when shared practices always have to be announced and their goodness displayed? Increasingly, having good politics appears to mean taking the right positions, saying the right things, circulating the most radical things on Facebook or Twitter or Tumblr, calling out the right people for being wrong, and having well-formed opinions.

We are encouraged—and we often encourage each other—to wear our politics and our analysis like badges, as markers of distinction. When politics becomes something that one has, like fashion, it

always needs to be visible in order to function. Actions need to be publicized, positions need to be taken, and our everyday lives need to be spoken loudly to each other. One is encouraged to make calculations about political commitments based on how they will be seen, and by whom. Politics becomes a spectacle to be performed. This reaches its height online, where sharing the right things and speaking the right words tend to be the only ways that people can know each other. Groups need to turn inward and constantly evaluate themselves in relation to these ideals and then project them outward, proclaiming their intentions, values, programs, and missions.

But since one can only have good politics in comparison to someone else who lacks them, rigid radicalism tends towards constant comparison and measuring. Often the best way to avoid humiliation for lacking good politics is to find others lacking in militancy, radicalism, anti-oppression, or some other ideal. One's politics can never quite match these perfectionist ideals, so one is subjected to constant shame and fear.

When radicals attack each other in the game of good politics, it is due at least in part to the fact that this is a place where people can exercise some power. Even if one is unable to challenge capitalism and other oppressive structures, even if one is unable to participate in the creation of alternative forms of life, one can always attack others for their complicity, and tell oneself that these attacks are radical in and of themselves. One's opponents in the game of good politics and rigid radicalism are not capitalists, nor white supremacists, nor police; they are others vying for the correct ways of critiquing and fighting capitalism, white supremacy, and policing. Comparison and evaluation of different camps or currents can be so constant that it becomes an end in itself: Every encounter with a new current must be approached with a distrustful search for flaws. We come to know others—their beliefs, their commitments, their worth—based on how good they are at staking out a position and by plotting that position in relation to our own.

In this sense, rigid radicalism is not one political current but a tendency that seeps into many different currents and milieus today. In some milieus, the currency of good politics is a stated (or demonstrated) willingness for direct action, riots, property destruction, and clashes with police. In others, it is the capacity for anti-oppressive analysis, avoidance of oppressive statements, and the calling out of those who make them. In others, it is the capacity to avoid work and survive without buying things or paying rent. In some, it is adherence to a vision of leftism or revolution, and in others it is the conviction that the left is dead and revolution is a ridiculous fantasy. In some, it is the capacity to have participated in a lot of projects, or to be connected to a big network of radical organizers. In every case, there is a tendency for one milieu to dismiss the commitments and values of the others and to expose their inadequacies. At its extreme, this generates a form of sectarianism that is fueled by the very act of being vocally sectarian.

The newcomer is immediately placed in a position of debt: owing dedication, self-sacrifice, and correct analysis that must be continuously proved. Whether it is the performance of anti-oppressive language, revolutionary fervor, nihilist detachment, or an implicit dress code, those who are unfamiliar with the expectations of the milieu are doomed from the start unless they “catch up” and conform. In subtle and overt ways, they will be attacked, mocked, and excluded for getting it wrong, even though these people are often the ones that “good politics” is supposed to support: those without formal education who have not been exposed much to radical milieus, but who have a stake in fighting.

None of this is meant to suggest that we should be more wishy-washy about oppression, or that hard lines are wrong, or that all radical practices are corrupt or bad. We think that developing analysis, naming mistakes, and engaging in conflict are all indispensable. To undo rigid radicalism is not a call to “get along” or “shut up and take action” or “be spontaneous.” It is definitely not a call for less radicalism. People’s capacities to challenge and unlearn oppressive behaviors, take direct action, or avoid selling

labor and paying rent can create and deepen cracks in the dominant order. They can all be enabling and transformative. But any of these practices can also become measuring sticks for comparison and evaluation that end up devaluing other practices and stifling the growth of collective capacities.

Because rigid radicalism induces a sense of duty and obligation everywhere, there is a constant sense that one is never doing enough. In this context, “burnout” in radical spaces is not just about being worn out by hard work; it is often code for being wounded, depleted, and frayed: “I’m fucking burning.” What depletes us is not just long hours but the tendencies of shame, anxiety, mistrust, competition, and perfectionism. It is the way in which these tendencies stifle the capacity for collective creativity and change. Often, saying one is burned out is the safest way to disappear, to take a break, to take care of oneself and get away from these dynamics.

It can be risky to discuss all this publicly; there is always the chance that one will be cast as a liberal, an oppressor, or a reactionary. For this reason, a lot of conversations about this are happening between people who already trust each other enough to know that they will not be met with immediate suspicion or attack. In these quieter conversations, there is more room for questioning and listening, with space for subtlety, nuance, and care that is so often absent when rigid radicalism takes hold. These are some of the questions we asked in our conversations with people for our book, *Joyful Militancy*: How does rigid radicalism work? What are its contours, and what are its sources? What triggers it, and what makes it spread? How can it be warded off, and how are people activating other ways of being?

When politics circulates in a world dominated by hypervisibility and rigidity, there is a huge swath of things that do not count, and can never count: the incredible things that people do when nobody is looking, the ways that people support and care for each other quietly and without recognition, the hesitations and stammerings that come through the encounter with other ways of living and

fighting, all the acts of resistance and sabotage that remain secret, the slow transformations that take years or decades, and all of the ineffable movements and struggles and projects that can never be fully captured in words or displayed publicly.

The Barricade is a volunteer-run public library with a focus on anarchism and leftist politics. We have texts both in English and Dutch and becoming a member and borrowing books is free! We believe that self-education is a crucial element in the struggle for social change and therefore we aim to provide a space for collective learning – join us for discussions, reading groups and workshops that are free and open to anyone interested!

Every Sunday from 4pm to 11pm. At 7pm vegan food is offered for donation by the Barriccoons Kitchen, an Utrecht-based anti-food waste collective inspired by raccoons.



Book-Café the Barricade
Every Sunday, 16pm - 23pm

ACU
Voorstraat 71
Utrecht